

Finding Blessings in the Midst of Trials

Nick and Melana Bresnyan face their cancer with faith and as witnesses to God's love.

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From his bed on the eleventh floor of a San Francisco hospital, Nick Bresnyan smiles and holds out two cellophane packets. “Would you like a necklace or earrings?” he asks.

Each envelope contains a piece of glass jewelry and a small card with cursive print: “Crafted by Nick because Jesus loves you!”

Since late last year, assembling jewelry has kept Nick, twenty-six, busy—especially through long days of treatment for brain cancer, his second bout with the disease after ten years of remission. But making necklaces is far more than a pastime; it's his ministry.

Anyone who walks past Nick receives his free gifts: nurses, receptionists, fellow patients, and their family members. Most people are “blown away” by the gesture, Nick says. He imitates one woman's surprise that a stranger would go out of his way to give her something: “For me? For me, really? Really?”

The jewelry, time and again, has led to unexpected conversations in hospital cafeterias, hallways, and waiting rooms. Sometimes people have allowed Nick and his family to pray with them.

The opportunity to reach out to people is one reason that Nick is able to face his illness with optimism. “I see so many people in here,” he says. “Some people don't have family members... giving them hope.

“I know it's the Lord's will that I'm here handing out necklaces,” he says.

Nick wasn't always so enthusiastic. “I used to be kind of a lazy, sit-back kind of Christian,” he says.

Then at age fifteen he was diagnosed with brain cancer. Within a few months he became



While undergoing cancer treatments, Nick Bresnyan makes jewelry to give away with the message, “Jesus loves you!”

a different person, according to his father, Dave. Before his illness, Nick had toyed around with drinking and hanging out with the wrong crowd, Dave says. “When he got cancer the first time, he really believed God... was working in his life to help him realize that was not the path God wanted him to go.”

Now Nick displays an “unselfish, giving attitude,” Dave says. He got involved in ministries, including Awana, where he worked with fifth and sixth graders. He also has developed a strong prayer life, his father says.

“Every time I see Nick, he wants to pray for someone else. Nick's never made it about him. He's always saying, ‘How can I ask God to help you out?’ When you're around that all the time, it's an encouragement,” says Dave. “It's hard to fathom your own son is an encouragement to you.”

According to Nick, God has used cancer to help him gain a valuable perspective on life. “It opened my eyes to how precious life is and family is,” Nick says, referring to the first



The Bresnyan family gathers in Nick's hospital room. From left: Jan, Melana, Nick, Laurie, and Dave.



Siblings Melana and Nick Bresnyan are fighting cancer with a positive outlook and a deep faith in God.

onset of his illness. Now its recurrence has “opened my eyes also to doing the Lord’s work and trying to be a blessing to others.”

Nick’s battle against cancer is only one part of the Bresnyan family’s story—a story that friends say is showing the power of God’s grace within Community Covenant Church in Rocklin,

California, a city of 50,000 located twenty miles north of Sacramento. Nick’s cancer returned last August. His sister Melana, nineteen, was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s lymphoma, another form of cancer, in February. Dave, a general contractor, lost his job this spring.

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Bresnyans set their eyes on God. They testify that God is bringing good out of their trials.

“They’re strong through it all—loving and caring,” says Sandra Green, a fellow member of the church and a good friend of the family. “I would probably crawl in a hole. I’m in awe of them.”

When Melana learned that the lump on her neck was cancerous, she admits she felt anything but strong. “I was bawling my eyes out,” she says. “It was shocking and overwhelming for me.”

But God has met her in her illness, she says, and even prepared her for the diagnosis in an unusual way. A couple days before the needle biopsy to determine whether the lump was cancerous, she dreamed that she was in a doctor’s office, and the doctor told her she had cancer. She had never heard the word “pathology” before, but she heard the word in her dream. She believes the

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vision was God's way of helping her prepare for the news.

When Melana's waist-length hair began to fall out from the chemotherapy, a hair stylist in town volunteered to cut her hair short. Then church members gave her a gift certificate to a wig shop. Melana herself finally decided to have a head shaving party.

"Usually that kind of thing would be sad and depressing, losing your hair," she says. Instead, "I had a blast. It was extremely liberating."

First she cut it into a mohawk, then she shaved it off.

"God has given me such a peace," says Melana, who hopes to become an elementary-school teacher one day. "I'm learning to lean on him for understanding of the whole situation. What a lot of people struggle with is the reason why. It doesn't matter why. I know the outcome is going to be amazing."

To aid the Bresnyans, members of Community Covenant Church have sent Nick care packages at the hospital. His local doctors recommended a stem-cell transplant, which he had to have done in San Francisco, more than 100 miles away. The church has held fundraisers, brought meals to the family twice a week, prayed for the children, and even created a website, siblingsincancer.org. One member found Nick's mom, Jan, a free place to stay in San Francisco through connections at Dolores Park Church (formerly First Covenant Church).

The benefits have gone both ways, church members say. Suzi Baxter has been spearheading efforts to raise \$30,000 to cover the family's medical expenses for a year. "As much as I hate what they're going through, it's been a blessing for me to get to know them. I'm thankful God has...allowed me to learn so much from them," she says, citing the Bresnyans' trust and faith in

God amid uncertainty.

Baxter is organizing a 500-person spaghetti dinner and silent auction to be held in the fall. A local restaurant will cater the food, and Baxter hopes to book a local Christian musician to sing at the dinner. She has been impressed by how many congregation members have stepped forward to help. "I feel this has really grown our church," she says.

Another friend of the Bresnyans agrees. "At the end of the day, it has had so far—and will continue to have—a deep effect on people's faith," says Bob Habian, who has been in a small group with Dave. "The family is definitely part of our church family in a very real way, and vice versa."

Helping the Bresnyans has created a model for how church, family, and community can work together in similar situations, Habian says, referring to four additional members of the congregation who have been diagnosed with cancer this year. As the congregation helps the Bresnyans, its members can see how God is "teaching us what we can do as a church to be supportive of a family," Habian says.

As difficult as the physical pain has been for Nick and Melana—and as painful as it has been for Jan and Dave to watch their children suffer—the physical problems have not been the family's only hardship. Frequent separation has also been difficult. Jan makes the 110-mile trek to San Francisco to stay with Nick, sometimes for a month at a time, while he receives stem-cell transplants. Dave, Melana, and the Bresnyans' oldest daughter, Laurie, stay back in Rocklin. Just keeping the family together and the household running has been tiring.

Financial needs have grown, exacerbated by Dave's loss of work. "We went to Sam's Club to buy some prescription

drugs," Dave says. The medicine, not covered by insurance, cost several hundred dollars. "I was beside myself. The drugs are starting to cost a fortune," he says.

But God has provided again and again. One day a friend took Dave to lunch and gave him an envelope. When Dave opened it, he found \$2,000 inside.

"God has worked out so many things in our lives," says Dave.

In the midst of their struggles, the family has drawn closer together. Laurie, thirty, says she used to prefer spending her time with friends rather than family. Now she is frequently at her parents' home.

"We value each other a lot more," she says. "Just watching them and how amazing they are...and how they're really relying on God and depending on God—it's made us all stronger."

Melana, too, describes her bond with Nick as closer for their shared illness. When they walk in public, she holds his hand. "He encourages me all the time... We talk about the situation, how much it stinks. We both can laugh together. We know exactly what it's like," she says. "He's honestly one of my best friends."

When doctors last fall told Nick that his first bout with cancer should have included chemotherapy—not just radiation—to prevent the cancer from recurring, Nick had a choice to make: would he blame his previous doctors for the relapse or let it go?

He chose to let it go. "You can't hold on to that anger. It'll sour you and make you bitter inside," Nick says.

Life, he says, is all about knowing and doing God's will. For Nick, that means making jewelry. "I've got to be salt and light for the Lord. I've got to be spreading the word," he says. "That's what we're here to do." □